

Teacher Version

Briefing Memo IX, World War II

The war was still almost a year away for the United States in January 1941 when Franklin Roosevelt set out his vision of the peace that would follow. He spoke of *Four Freedoms*—freedom of speech and worship, freedom from want and fear. Although the country was officially neutral, it was clear what side the United States must join. There was really no choice. Throughout the year, the United States strengthened its ties with, and support for, the United Kingdom. [*Lend-Lease Agreement, Atlantic Charter*]

During that same year, relations with Japan grew even more tense and troubled as the United States embargoed oil, aviation fuel, petroleum products, and scrap metal—ingredients essential for a war-making machine. [*Japan Protests Export Ban, Unsatisfactory Relations*] Japan's options were limited. Unless they could access these materials somewhere else, Japan's East Asian empire would be finished. In November 1941 the Japanese sent a final special envoy to Washington, but the terms were completely unacceptable to the United States. Japan decided on war [*Telegram to the Japanese Embassy from Tokyo*], but they needed time to move their fleet into position so they kept up a pretense of diplomacy. President Roosevelt knew that time was growing short so he took an unprecedented step. He sent a plea for peace directly to the Emperor on December 6, 1941. [*A Situation of Extraordinary Importance*]

The following morning, December 7, the Japanese requested a special Sunday meeting with the Secretary of State. [*Telegram to the Japanese Embassy from Tokyo requesting a 1 p.m. meeting, A Sudden Meeting*] Negotiations were over—the war had begun with a surprise attack on the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii. [*The Fourteen Part Message, A Date which will Live in Infamy, the United States Declares War*] Japan's allies, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States on December 11 and the U.S. Congress voted unanimously for war.

The United States immediately turned to war in the Pacific. President Roosevelt's diplomatic strategy was to build up China to join the United States, Great Britain, France, and the USSR as one of the great world powers. The leader of the Chinese Nationalist Government, Chiang Kai-shek, joined the President and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill at a special strategy summit in January 1943. [*The Cairo Conference*]

But American diplomats on the ground in China were worried about the inefficiency and corruption in Chiang's government. They were concerned that Chiang was spending more of his time—and American resources—fighting a civil war against the Chinese Communists. [*A Growing Rift*] The diplomats, known as China Hands, suggested that the U.S. send observers to learn more about the Communists and their leader, Mao Zedong. The on-site observers were very impressed with what they saw [*Our First Impressions are Extremely Favorable*], but the United States was publicly committed to Chiang. That difference in perspective would have ominous implications for future U.S. policy.

No one could forget the aftermath of World War I and the battle over the League of Nations. This time, diplomats and politicians agreed, would be different. In 1943, the House of Representatives passed a resolution authorizing the United States to create a post-war international body. [*The Fulbright Resolution*] Diplomats from the Allied Powers did just that. In January 1944, negotiators agreed on a new postwar economic framework [*The Bretton Woods Agreement*], followed by that for a new international political organization—the United Nations—[*Charter of the United Nations*] and later, a new global organization dedicated to fighting disease. [*Constitution of the World Health Organization*]

Two weeks before the United Nations was scheduled to meet in San Francisco in April 1945, President Franklin Roosevelt died. But the United States remained committed to FDR's vision and the new president, Harry S. Truman, delivered the opening address. [*The Moral Force of Justice*]

World War II was almost over. As the Allies turned again to their own national interests, differences, misunderstandings, and deception arose. The 1945 meeting between Roosevelt, Churchill, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin at Yalta, marked the last great conference between the war time leaders. [*Yalta Agreement*] But its secret agreements also set the stage for the next great conflict for the allies who would soon become enemies—the Cold War. ■